

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 20, 2026

Prayer of the Day

Almighty and eternal God, you show perpetual lovingkindness to us your servants. Because we cannot rely on our own abilities, grant us your merciful judgment, and train us to embody the generosity of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 1 “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 9 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received a denarius. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ 13 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

“Good stuff that doesn’t always find its way into a sermon”

Recently we’ve been offering some reflections or insights that are helpful yet not always connected to “where the sermon is going” on a particular week. Today’s parable of the householder contains nuggets that might not get smelted into the homily yet are good to pay attention to.

What's life in God's commonwealth (kingdom) like? We start with day labourers. Social science experts point to the system of honour and shame as having a feature where people are approached and asked to work rather than someone of "lower station" approaching someone in a higher social class to ask for work (Malina and Rohrbaugh Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels: 2003 Fortress Press, Minneapolis).

Day labourers were people without land, or homes with extended families. Day labourers were at the bottom of the social ladder. Now consider those day labourers who wait all day to be recruited to work—lower than low! It's important to note here that there's no evidence the eleventh hour workers are lazy—but for some reason they aren't the first chosen—age? disability? not from 'around here'? unskilled?

The crux of the parable is how the householder treats the labourers. Social norms are adhered to when the householder approaches groups of people and they agree on terms for the workday. Seems fair.

The scandal of the parable comes when EVERYBODY gets equal treatment at the end of the day regardless of when they were recruited and how long they worked. Even day labourers know the system has tilted in some weird way. I think a fruitful spot to dwell and preach upon is that the realm of God puts everyone on equal footing—all are created in God's image and are worthy of dignity and deserve a share of God's abundance to meet their daily needs. For me, "heaven on earth" would be such provision for everyone without the grumbling from those who think they deserve better or more than their neighbour.

The householder asks those grumbling (the word choice is intentional and harks to Israel's children wandering in the desert, grumbling when water or food aren't plentiful) if "their eye is evil" because of his generosity.

The evil eye... Many cultures recognize the human gaze as potentially greedy—they eye as a window to the soul evidently takes in the world as much as it expresses one's state of being. So ogling over shiny objects leads to desire and if the evil eye has its way, we scheme to take what is not ours and keep it for ourselves. Entire social and theological points of view are built around the idea that human suffering comes from the greed and scheming we do to get what others have (a google search of Girardism and memetic theory will lead to a lifetime of reading).

Pitfalls in interpreting the parable: Way back, preachers and teachers used to tell us the rich tend to “spiritualize the material in life” and the poor tend to “materialize the spiritual in life”. It’s not simple as that, really but for us to regard the parable as an allegory or as only a metaphor for God’s goodness leads to ignoring those who hunger and lack what they need for daily living.

Further down the path of misinterpretation is actual heresy (false teaching)—Some preachers even now have somehow gotten it into their noggins that Jesus came to replace Judaism with another religion or church. Wrong. Jesus did say he came to bring abundant life and his teaching is often a corrective designed to bring love and humanity back into religion (which we humans often turn into some form of self justification and control over others). The misinterpretation also seems to define the kingdom of God in ways outside of Jesus’ parables or sermons.

Things I’m thinking about

Squeamishness and some snarky rhetoric pops up whenever we talk about reparations for people harmed or about housing for everyone. The political landscape is charged with such emotion about how resources are to be distributed. Some would say less fortunate folk are just looking for a handout. Others (I among them if you’re wondering) find the inequitable distribution of the world’s resources more problematic. Even now as artificial intelligence becomes prominent how many are asking questions beyond its inherent benefits or flaws; questions like who ‘gets’ to control and decide how this new technology will be allocated and used and for whose long term benefit? I think the parable gives us a glimpse into the common good (and our frequent impulse to object to it when ‘the last become first’).